

Cycle's Child

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Summary: My idea for Breath of Fire 5, Ryu and his adopted sister Nina are faced with the mystery of who they really are...New chapter added!

1. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator">

Breath of Fire and all associated characters are the property of Capcom. All original characters are mine. All rights reserved. I take no profit from this, only perverse, sickening pleasure at the sight of mangled bodies and...eh, better stop.

This is a fic in no way related to my others. This is my own Breath of Fire story, dealing with a whole other era...

**

CYCLE'S CHILD

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Prologue:

The Heart of the Storm

Heavy footprints are left in the mud as he walks down the path, holding the object in his arms. An object four feet long, wrapped in swaths and blankets, covered so the rain does not damage the precious cargo underneath.

Lightning flashes in the distance, thunder cracking in its wake.

It has been a long and heavy journey, he muses.

One that will not end anytime soon, he recounts with a heavy sigh.

He marches into the small village, raindrops splattering on his heavy cloak, occasional drops of water sliding into his eyes, but he marches on.

This is far too important for personal comfort.

He walks to the house he knows that will do. He knocks on the door, and waits.

A man with wings coming from his back, in a nightrobe and pajamas, answers the door...and freezes.

"Hello," the cloaked man says, in a heavy, weary voice, "Take it."

A winged woman with light brown hair walks over, looking from her husband to the cloaked man.

"Jacobi?", she asks, "Who is this?"

"I bring something for you," the cloaked man says, and hands him the object.

The woman slowly pulls down the swaths...and gasps as she sees the sleeping face of a young, blue haired boy.

"My work is done," the cloaked man says, turning, "We will not meet again, Jacobi."

"I...understand.", the winged man responds, "Godspeed. My Ladon watch over you."

"I doubt he will."

He begins to walk back into the storm, pulling his cloak tightly over him with his now free hands.

"Wait!", the woman yells, standing at the doorway, "Who is he? The boy?"

The man halts, turning slightly.

"Ryu.", the man says, "The child's name is Ryu."

A bolt of lightning, as if on command, lances from the sky, striking where the cloaked man stands.

When the blinding light clears, he is gone, a faint sparkle of energy in the puddle.

Jacobi urges her back into the house, closing the door, watching her undo the swatches and covers over the boy.

"Katalina..."

"He's our boy, now," she says, taking the quilt on the couch and wrapping it around the child as he moans, his head rolling about, "Jacobi, check if the soup is still hot. He must have caught his

death of cold out there..."

"I doubt that, Katalina," he says, taking a wooden bowl from the table, "Is Nina still asleep?"

She looks up, sighing heavily.

"I think we built that other room for a reason," she says, smiling faintly.

He chuckles, smiling.

"I'm a firm believer in fate. Although I expected to be a bit older before we had a grown son-"

"J'tinra kuditz?!"

They both turn...and see the boy sitting upright, quickly standing, looking about the living room/dining room in a mixture of horror and fascination.

"H...hello, Ryu," she says, smiling slightly, slowly walking to him, "Ryu...my name is Katalina. This is Jacobi...we're the people raising you, now..."

He backs away, his green eyes flashing brightly, making the house rumble faintly.

"Jacobi," she says, gripping the table, "What-"

"I think...I think something is wrong..."

The shaking becomes stronger, more violent, his eyes glowing brightly as the chair at the end of the table cracks down the middle and shatters...

A ten year old, blonde haired girl walks out from the connecting hall, rubbing sleep from her eyes as she walks towards Katalina...and freezes, Ryu turning to her.

"Nina....", Katalina whispers, "Don't-"

The boy extends a hand towards the girl, the two adults frozen in place by some invisible force.

"Isharo jikon _itrado!_", Ryu growls, his face contorting into one of anger, energy gathering in front of his outstretched hand...

And a bolt of lightning shoots through the window, striking him and making him scream.

He collapses, unconscious, to the floor, bumping his head as he hits.

Katalina rushes over, gathering the girl in her arms, looking down at the boy and then back at her husband.

"He...he's harmless, now.", Jacobi says, walking over and checking Ryu's pulse, "The lightning erased his memory...well...Nina?"

"D...daddy?", the girl asks, "Dad, who's-"

"Nina...meet Ryu. I hope he didn't make too bad a first impression."

Chapter 1:

Childhood

When Ryu awoke a day later, he had no memory of the events. Or any memory except his name and asking where his father was. In the windian language, not the odd foreign language he was using before.

He quickly attached himself to Jacobi and Katalina, learning from them. And learning quickly.

Ryu and Nina became fast friends, inseperable as they grew. They were considered the same age, and since they were never told what Ryu's true age was, they left it at that.

The only other person the couple told of the circumstances of Ryu's adoption was the village doctor, a dog-like forest clan named Erik, who simply nodded and told them he couldn't find anything out of ordinary with Ryu.

For the next nine years, they lived in their village, the small town of Kaghtin, a small landlocked community two miles from the ocean.

They were a tight family. For what affection Ryu lacked for his adopted parents he made up with his friendship with Nina.

The two went to school together in the town, did work together, did everything together. Despite the problems they had the first night, the parents were determined to give Ryu as normal a childhood as they could.

They talked of the near-massacre only in private, where they knew no one could hear.

And never suspected anything could bring it crashing down on them.

Nine years later.

He runs along the grassy field, legs pumping as he passes the fenced-off perimeter, clearing it with a single leap.

The wind is playing havoc with his hair, and the sweat is only causing it to matte even more.

He can see his target coming up ahead, completely oblivious to him.

Kneeling there, picking flowers at the base of the hill...

And shrieking as he grips her by the slender waist, turning her about. Her blonde hair twirls with her, running over his own blue hair, her smile beaming as her white, feathered wings slope back.

"Hello, Nina.", he says, returning her smile.

"Hello, Ryu.", she responds, placing her hands on her shoulders, one of her hands still holding a set of flowers.

In the years, they have matured. He has grown into a strong, able young man. She has grown into a beautiful, young woman, and they have still been inseparable. Friends as long as they can remember, her parents wonder when that friendship will blossom into something more...

He lets go of her waist, letting her wipe the dirt and soil from her full-body grey/blue dress, her wings returning to their normal height.

"You snuck up on me again," she says, "I wish you'd tell me how you do that."

"My secret, Nina.", he responds, chuckling, "C'mon, they're waiting for us to get back to supper."

She looks up at him, her eyes going wide.

"It's time _already?_"

"Yes. You've been here for three hours. I'm going to have to get you a timepiece for your birthday if you keep doing this."

"Doing what?", she asks, narrowing her eyes, smirking.

"Spending all day up here," he responds, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you weren't interested in me anymore."

They laugh as he takes her wrist with his hand, starting to drag her back.

She yanks his hand, pulling him off his feet, taking her down with him as they fall to the ground. She rolls him onto his back, sitting on his stomach.

"Not yet," she says, "I want to show you something."

"Show me what?"

"You'll see!", she responds, jumping off him, running up the hillside, "Catch me if you can!"

He climbs to his feet, running after her...and stops, seeing the sun beginning to disappear into the distance, the sky painted with red, gold and pink. The hill they stand on ends as a cliff, going down a good half a mile into the water crashing on the rocks below.

"I guess it really is that late.", she says.

He smiles, wrapping his arms around her waist...

And lifts her up, hefting her over his shoulder as she shrieks, laughing.

"It is," he says, "And I'm getting you home before they start to worry."

And he carries her back, kicking all the way.

"If you must, please understand that we can go around the town, but it's far easier to simply make it into a fort."

Commander Jansen Maroen sighs, urging on the horse as the subordinate rides alongside him.

The quarter moon hangs over them, illuminating his gold-violet armor, the grey armored troops riding behind him, two dozen in all.

"And if the residents protest?", the grey-black armored subordinate asks.

"Well, we'll explain the terms," Jansen responds, "We'll explain the entire situation, and ask for permission to build the fort by the ocean. I have permission to have them heavily compensated. That should hopefully swing them to our favor. If, however, they do not go along with the idea, we simply build the fort somewhere else. It's just damned inconvenient...so, we simply hope for the best when we arrive tomorrow. Understood?"

The subordinate nods, grinning slightly.

"Understood completely, Commander."

Jansen nods, smiling, pulling off his sloped back helmet and shaking his flaxen hair loose.

"Good. I hope you remember how to sleep riding, then..."

And he simply rides, for much of the remaining night...

Ryu eases open the door, walking out onto the porch of the house...and smiles, seeing Nina leaning on the railing.

"Stargazing?", he asks.

She sees him out of the corner of her eyes, smiling as he stands next to her.

"Yeah," she responds, "It's nice out."

He leans against the railing, sighing as he looks up at the sky.

"Tomorrow's the weekend.", he says.

"I know."

"I'm planning on going for a hike," he continues, "Go up to that cliff. Climb down and see what I can find."

She turns to him, shaking her head.

"Ryu, that's a long drop," she says, "You could be hurt."

"I'll be fine. You want to come with me?"

"Come with-...Ryu, I don't want you to go in the _first_ place!"

"I have the rope, I have the supplies. I've never been down that cliff, and I want to see if there's any shells I haven't seen, down there. Also looks like a good fishing spot..."

She rolls her eyes, smirking.

"Fishing?"

"I got that four pound flounder last week at the old late. Who knows what I can get at the sea?"

She sighs, leaning on her side, and shrugs.

"Fine. I'll go."

"Thanks. I like the company."

She smiles, turning back to the railing, placing her hand on his, looking back at the stars.

And they simply stand there for a while longer, until they finally go inside for bed.

Jacobi groans, an audible crack coming from his back as he lies down on the blue sheets of the bed, stretching out his wings before folding them back behind him.

He turns as Katalina climbs into the bed, lying on her side as she wraps her wings around her nightgown, resting her arm around his chest as she snuggles up to him.

"I caught a peak at Ryu and Nina.", she says.

"Hm?"

"They were talking outside," she responds, smirking, "He's going to a cliff Nina found a flower patch at. Nina's going with him and they'll see what they find."

"Hm...sounds dangerous."

"Nina is perfectly capable of taking care of himself."

"Good. I was going to say the same thing about Ryu, so we have nothing to worry about."

She gives him a steady, skeptical look...and laughs, resting her head on her pillow.

"You like having a son."

"And I like having a daughter," he says, wrapping his hands around her waist, "And I like having a wife as lovely as you."

She purses her lips, raising an eyebrow.

"You're still a flirt."

"And I only flirt with you."

He leans over, softly kissing her, pulling her closer.

"They're both asleep...", he whispers, "And we tend to be quiet."

"Jacobi..."

He smiles, rolling her onto her back, lying on his side.

"You're still beautiful," he says, "We've been married for...how long?"

"Twenty wonderful years," she says, "And I haven't regretted a single thing about it."

She returns his smiles, pulling him over, passionately kissing him as their arms wrap around each other...

The rope touches the sand as Ryu lands on the soles of his boots, holding out his hands as Nina lands in his arms.

"Well, that went off without a hitch.", she says, smiling as she climbs out of his grip, straightening out her dress, "So...where's the fishing spot?"

"Not sure. I'm trying to pick it out."

She turns to him, watching him snap together his fishing rod, stringing along the line.

"Lovely plan, Ryu."

He gives off one of his mischevous smiles, laying the pole over his shoulder.

"Well, let's get us some fish.", he says.

"Yuck."

"You don't like fish?"

"Not really.", she says, screwing her face in disgust, "Mom always has to boil it. I'm just hoping Dad cooks it."

He chuckles, walking alongside her, absently putting an arm around her waist as they walk to the water.

The neigh of horses catches Jacobi's attention as he walks from the local store with a bag full of fruit, making him turn to the town gates as they open. Kaghtin is an isolated community. Self sufficient.

Visitors and outsiders are a rare occurrence for the village...and especially these visitors.

Soldiers.

He nods to Katalina as she walks out of their house, walking to the leader of the troops as the gold-violet armored man dismounts.

"Good morning, Jansen.", he says.

The armored man turns, pulling off his helmet...and smiling, widely.

"Jacobi," he says, "Jacobi Kirrick. I was wondering where you went to after disappearing off the face of the planet."

Jacobi smiles, shrugging.

"I live quietly with my wife and children.", he says, "I like it here. I'm retired, so if the Council sent you...well, tell them I'm not interested."

"Jacobi, I had no idea you were even still alive," Jansen says, smiling widely, "Much less living here. My mission is different. We're here to ask for permission to build a fort nearby."

Jacobi nods, smiling...and turns as he hears someone shouting for him.

"Dad!", Nina yells, waving and running from the other side of the small town, "Dad, we're done!"

Jacobi chuckles, turning.

"I thought you two were going fishing."

"We were, but the first fish that bit snapped the rod in two.", she responds, "He's not too happy about that, so we're going to be spending a while finding some harder wood."

He waves back, smirking as she walks back into the house.

"Your daughter?", Jansen asks, "Beautiful girl."

"Yes, that's Nina. She's pretty much taken.", he responds, "My son's adopted, and they're very fond of each other. We've all but announced a wedding date."

Jansen chuckles, smiling.

And the smile quickly fades as he sees another man walking to them.

Tall, matted, wet blue hair. Soaked from head to toe from what's most likely the fish trying to reel him in. He gives off a sheepish smile to Jacobi, Jacobi waving back, turning to Jansen...

And stepping back. Jansen's eyes are now glowing pale red. He grabs the hilt of the scabbard strapped to his side, pulling out a long,

polished blade.

"_The Boy!_", the army commander growls, his voice suddenly inhuman, scratchy and cracked, "_He is the One!_"

With that, he plunges the sword into Jacobi's chest, running him straight through to the hilt, pulling out and letting the older man collapse to the ground, blood flowing freely from the mortal wound.

"_Bring the boy!_", Jansen roars, "_Kill them all! Burn this village to the ground!_"

And with that, the soldiers yell, and attack.

Chapter 2:

Fate

It's an image that instantly burns itself in his memory.

The sight of the armored man running his adopted father through, the bloodied blade coming out the back, right between the shoulder blades.

He can hear his adopted mother and Nina screaming, as Ryu simply stands there, shocked...

And sees the soldiers, eyes glowing faint red, rearing back their horses and charging into the town, brandishing blades at the commander's orders to burn the place to the ground...

And to seize him.

"No.", he whispers, stepping back.

He sees the gauntleted fist striking out towards him...

And he grabs it, ripping the soldier from his steed, holding him up in the air by his gauntlet alone.

"No.", he growls, his eyes beginning to glow, the ground beneath him starting to shake.

He tosses the soldier, the soldier screaming as he flies through the air, past the town gate at the slightest motion from Ryu.

He clenches his fists, sucking in air with angry, ragged breaths...

Thu-thump.

His feet leave the dirt. The air whips violently as he hovers inches off the ground, eyes flashing bright green.

"**_NO!_"**"

An invisible force seizes the necks of every one of the soldiers

before they can strike down the fleeing villagers, lifting them into the air, grasping at their collars as their horses ride on.

One by one, they fly through the air, slamming into the ground at the feet of the commander, the red-eyed man watching dispassionately as his forces are tossed around by the young man.

Energy gathers at Ryu's outstretched hands, his face contorting into a snarl. His entire body sheathes itself in reddish gold light, pluming into a display of pure, raw power...

"Ryu! Stop!"

He hears Nina yelling. He hears a voice telling him to kill, telling him to maim, telling him to reap vengeance for this travesty...

Which is what Jacobi would not want. No bloodshed in this town...

"Go."

Energy whips from his hands, lancing across the town and wrapping around the soldiers, making them disappear in flashes of red light. Which is when Ryu falls to his feet, then to his knees, and collapses to the ground, the last image in his fading consciousness is his adopted mother rushing to Jacobi's side...

The greying-haired Plains Runner shakes his head, backing away from the bed as he looks over to Katalina.

"I'm sorry," Erik says, "I've done what I can. The blade went right through."

Jacobi nods, weakly, reaching over and gripping her hand.

Erik backs out of the room, as Jacobi looks over to his wife, his expression serene.

"Jacobi...", she whispers.

"It's...alright.", he coughs, "I saw this coming..."

"Please...", she whispers, "Don't...if we can get Ryu's powers to heal..."

"No...no, his powers...don't work like...like that...", he responds, "It's my time...Katalina. Tell Nina for me..."

She nods, tears forming in her eyes.

He smiles, faintly, closing his eyes.

"Good...", he whispers, "I've never regretted..."

She says nothing, biting her lip, as his grip starts to slack.

"I'm sorry," he croaks, "It was too soon...I'm only hoping...he'll finish this without....me..."

His eyes slowly cloud, rolling up. She calmly reaches over, gripping his limp hand, closing his eyes. She then sits back down, pressing her forehead to his hand, and begins to cry.

Ryu slowly awakens, feeling the bump on his head as he feels a furry hand on his shoulder.

He looks up as his vision clears, seeing Erik standing there, a long expression on his face.

Ryu bolts up, running down the hall to the bedroom. Nina intercepts him before he can walk through, looking him in the eyes...

And slowly wrapping her arms around him, burying her face on his shoulder. Her wings wrap around him, her body shaking against him.

He looks over his shoulder, seeing his adopted mother sitting there, crying. Sees his adopted father lying there, eyes closed, blood staining the sheets. His chest is still. No signs of life at all.

He's dead.

He's murdered.

Murdered by those he had the opportunity to kill, but let run away...

He breaks Nina's embrace, running out, slamming the door to the house as he leaves.

Nina silently watches, turning to her mother, walking into the room as Katalina pulls the sheet over Jacobi's face.

"Let him go.", Katalina says, "He'll go off to find the killers and kill them himself."

"Mom..."

"Nina, you should go, to.", Katalina continues, folding her hands in her lap, "Erik will take care of the funeral arrangements. Ryu needs you more than I need you."

She slowly stands, her face unchanging as she eases herself up with the help of the armrests, shakily walking across the room.

Nina follows her as she walks to the living room, slumping down on the couch.

"Mom," she says, "You need me here. I have to help-"

"No."

Katalina slowly looks up, folding her hands in her lap.

"I need my children here," she says, "I have no children of my own."

Nina says nothing, her face going blank as her mother clenches her

eyes shut.

"Nina, I never wanted to tell you this," she continues, "But you're not my daughter. Like Ryu, you were adopted. But far too early to remember it. When your father...when he and I were married for less than a year, her came home with you in his arms. You were a baby. Weeks old. He said you would need us to raise you...and I was too ready to agree."

She looks up, as Nina slowly sits down in a chair, shaking.

"It does not mean I love you any less," she continues, "But...I think you have to go. Ryu needs you far more than I do."

Nina slowly nods, swallowing hard.

"But...who's..."

"I don't know, Nina. I don't know."

Katalina walks over, placing her hand on Nina's shoulder.

"But maybe you should find out."

Ryu stops a few miles from the town, sitting on the dirt and holding his head in his hands.

Dead.

Dead.

His father, the man who raised him and saw him as his pride and joy is dead.

Dead because someone saw themselves as right to take a life and he let him get away with it...

Because he hesitated. Because he stopped himself. Because he thought it would be better...

"Ryu!"

He doesn't look up as she lands right in front of him, her wings limply hanging from her shoulders.

He slowly stands, walking past her to the forest in the distance.

She runs after him, running to his side and turning him to her.

"I'm going with you.", she says, firmly.

"Nina, they need you back there."

He tries to turn back, Nina's grip tightening.

"No. Mother wants me to go with you," she says, "Ryu, please. Listen to me. I know what you're going to do-"

"What am I going to do?", he snaps, "Kill them like they killed

Father?"

"Yes."

He says nothing...and closes his eyes, hanging his head.

"No," he says, "No...no. No no no. I can't."

Tears begin to flow from his eyes as he clenches them shut, taking her free hand with his own.

"No...he taught me better than that," he says, "Nina...Nina, Mom needs you back home. I just have to-"

"Ryu, I'm going with you whether you want me or not," she snaps, "And that's final!"

He nods, slowly, wiping away the tears as he turns.

"Fine," he says, "Fine. I...just need to go, that's it. I need to see if I can find something, someone, anyone."

He resumes walking, Nina catching up and walking beside him.

"Why?"

"They could be back," he says, "I....I just have the feeling that _I_ was responsible."

"Ryu, don't say that. They're soldiers. They're always like that. They let their power go to their heads and people suffer."

He turns to her, furrowing his brow.

"That's what...that's what Mother says," she responds, hesitantly.

He nods, gripping her hand firmly with his own.

"I could use the company," he says with a faint smile, "Thank you for coming."

She nods, smiling, leaning her head against his as they near the forest...

"_The Boy! Take the Boy!_"

They turn, seeing the soldiers charging down the road towards them, swords drawn.

He picks her up, his eyes glowing green...and he runs to the woods.

Runs faster than she knew anything could run, the landscape becoming a blur in his wake as he outruns the horses themselves, carrying her into the darkness of the forests.

He says nothing, not even looking back as the soldiers pursue them, his eyes glowing a bright, iridescent green as they pass tree after

tree, vines barely missing her as he dodges and weaves the natural hazards with disturbing precision.

"Ryu!", she shouts, looking at his completely pale, emotionless face, "Ryu...what are you doing...?"

He skids to a halt, turning. She looks over his shoulder...and sees a gorge dozens, hundreds of feet deep.

She climbs out of his arms, turning...and sees the red eyes of the quickly approaching soldiers.

"_Trust me._", he says.

She turns to him, then back to the soldiers...

And gasps as he quickly, forcefully kisses her, going limp against him.

"I'm sorry.", he says, his eyes returning to their normal color.

"Sorry...for what?"

His eyes resume their glowing, a faint smile crossing his lips.

"_For this._"

And with that, he pushes her into the gorge, screaming. He steps off the edge, his face serene, and disappears from view.

And far back, Jansen Maroen's eyes dim back to normal, quickly ordering his men to half.

"Hn...? In Ladon's name, where are we?!", he demands.

His subordinates mull about, looking about.

"Looks like the Ydrall woods, Commander."

"...oh.", Maroen says, and shrugs, "Well...this is...odd. Men, withdraw. Head back to base. Let's figure out what happened from there.

The other men agree, and follow him as they ride the horses out of the woods.

Ryu slowly opens his eyes, feeling the cold, damp soil on his face, on his hands. He lifts his head, looking about...and sees Nina, sprawled out on the ground.

He crawls over, taking deep, ragged breaths, turning her about...and sees blood matting her hair, a soft, pained moan escaping her delicate lips.

"Nina...", he whispers, "Oh God, Nina, no..."

Not like this...

First his father, now her...

He looks up as a twig breaks, seeing a massive silhouette approaching them.

He slowly rises, grabbing a fallen branch, holding it like a sword...and sees the weapon of his opponent.

A nine foot long halberd. Gleaming with the dew and blood of fresh kill, adorned with gemstones and a polished wooden shaft.

Ryu looks up, seeing the deep, blue eyes from the silhouette...and he collapses, sprawled out next to Nina.

And the last thing he feels is the massive hands lifting him up...

2. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 3:

Saving Graces

"We have guests, my wife."

"Well, it should be an occasion to remember. Is she hurt?"

"Yes."

"A head wound. A mortal head wound. She's already in a coma."

"Can you heal her?"

"I already have. She's lucky you got here quickly. I cannot heal corpses. I'm not that powerful."

"I'm well aware. How is she?"

"She'll awaken in a few hours. Are they..."

"A blue haired man with green eyes and a blonde haired windian woman. Who do you think they are?"

"Oh...dear. I knew that this was too good to last."

"Hmph. You always have been pessimistic."
>

Ryu slowly opens his eyes, shifting on the bed of straw and down, groaning.

He remembers falling...finding Nina unconscious and bleeding...

"He's awake."

He turns to the sound of the voice, snapping up...

And sees a tall man with slightly greying dark hair standing there, hands clasped behind him.

Ryu climbs off the bed, looking about the somewhat spacious, fire-lit cabin, two doors at opposite ends.

"My name is Galen," the man says, "I found you and a girl at the bottom of the gorge."

Ryu quickly turns to him, tensing.

"Where's Nina?", he asks, "The girl, where is she?!"

"Her name is Nina, hm...", Galen says, and nods, "Don't be concerned. My wife is a healer. Nina's wound was not severe and she's healed, but still sleeping."

He visibly relaxes, nodding as he sits back down on the bed.

"Thank you," he responds, "My name is Ryu. Ryu Kirrick."

"Kirrick?"

"That's my adopted last name," he responds, "I don't know what my real last name is."

Galen's shoulders slump, and he sighs.

"I see," he responds, "Well, far be it from me to not offer hospitality. There should be something for you to eat around here, and I will be back shortly."

He bows, walking through the door he entered, walking into a spartan bedroom, looking to the golden-haired woman watching over Nina.

"He is awake."

She nods, smiling faintly.

"Good.", she responds, "Nina is resting well. I suggest they retire for the night. I cannot sense any others in the area."

Galen nods, walking over to the caldron hanging over the fire.

"It seems that we're sleeping with company," he says, filling a bowl with the contents of the pot, "You will take care of Nina's needs?"

"What sort of hostess would I be if I didn't?", she asks with an innocent smile.

He chuckles, walking over and kissing her on the cheek.

"Still a better one than the first time we crossed paths."

She laughs, and walks over to the pot as Galen walks out...

>

His well-manicured hand slides down a single strand of her pale-gold hair, another tracing along the frame of one of her large, white wings, making Queen Kayla de Wyndia shudder slightly.

"You act as if you don't enjoy my company.", the man, a handsome, dark brown haired man in the dressings of a high-ranking noble says, "Every time I touch you, you seem to want to jump. Why would that be, my dear Queen?"

She grits her teeth under her aristocratic face, closing her eyes.

"Because there are times I'd rather be alone.", she softly responds.

She pulls out of his embrace, walking over to her bed and sitting on it, folding her hands in her lap. The man smiles, clasping his hands behind his back, walking over to her and standing in front of her.

"And what times would that be?", he asks, "You've shown hesitation around me, I admit. But never discomfort."

"Please...just leave.", she says, "Now."

He sighs...and reaches out, grabbing her by the back of her head, pulling her head back and forcefully kissing her. She struggles, trying to push him away, clenching her eyes shut as his tongue runs along her teeth.

He releases, smiling, bringing up his hand to catch her fist, and swinging the back of his hand across her face, making her shriek as she sprawls out across the bed.

"While the offer is tempting," he says, smiling, "I think I'll pass. Remember my offer, my dear Queen: Share my bed or all of Windia shares my blade. I don't think I'll make this offer too many more times."

He makes a gesture, and disappears in a burst of fading light, Kayla watching, holding her reddened cheek with her hand. And slowly collapsing to the bed, shuddering as she curls up into fetal position, wrapping her wings tightly around her.
>

Shafts of sunlight peak through the forest canopy, illuminating the windows of the cabin as they stream through the blinds.

Ryu slowly awakens, rolling over to his side on the straw mattress...and opening his eyes as he feels cloth and skin under his fingers. Lying next to him is Nina, her face peaceful, a welcome change from the last time he saw her.

"Nina?", he croaks.

She moans, smiling, opening her eyes.

"Are you alright?", he asks.

She nods, sighing, laying her head on her hands as her eyes meet his.

"I'm fine, Ryu.", she says, "Just a bit sore."

He smiles, sitting up, swinging his feet over the bed and standing.

"That's great.", he says, turning to her, "Well, I'll see-"

"We are up."

He turns, seeing Galen walking from the other room, in the same tunic as yesterday.

"Anna and I tend to wake up before sunrise.", he says, "I'm sorry if this startled you. But I put Nina next to you when you were sleeping. Anna and I need to sleep, to."

Nina smiles, chuckling.

"That's fine," she says, "Thank you for helping us."

"What sort of forest dwellers would we be if we didn't help those in need, hm? Now, if you'll give us a little time, we'll be off."

Nina sits up, stretching out her wings and folding them around her.

"Off to where?"

"Off to find out about the soldiers that attacked you, of course.", Galen says, his voice becoming slightly deeper, "We'll stop by a forest clan village for supplies, and then procede to Windia."

Ryu nods, sitting on the bed.

"Alright. I don't see why not."

Galen nods, smiling, and walks back into the other room.

Nina pulls herself over to Ryu, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and laying her chin next to his head.

"Are you alright?", she asks.

"I...yeah. Yeah, somewhat.", he says, gripping her hand with his own, "I nearly got us both killed-"

She places a finger on his lip, turning him to face her.

"No," she says, "Those soldiers nearly got us both killed. You saved us from them, and then Galen and Anna came to rescue us. So do not blame yourself. No matter what."

He nods, smiling, closing his eyes as he rests his head on her shoulder, gathering her in his arms.

And neither of them see Anna watching before she sneaks back into the other room...

>

The crossbow bolt slides into place as Erik quickly cocks his weapon, satisfied that it works.

"I still don't understand it.", Katalina says, watching him from her couch in her living room, "Jacobi knew him. Jansen was never a violent man."

"People change," Erik responds, "Sometimes more than others. All I know is that he killed Jacobi. And I intend to find out why."

She nods, sighing.

"Ryu's still out there. So is Nina.", she says, "Gods, I know something horrible is going to happen. I know they'll be in danger. But I know he isn't out there for revenge, just...something else."

Erik nods, walking over, placing his hand on her shoulder.

"Jacobi taught him well," he says, "But he never taught me. At least, I never listened. So I am going out for revenge, Katalina. Don't expect me to return any time soon."

And with that, he grabs the quiver of bolts and the bag resting on the table, and walks out.

>

It took surprisingly little time for them to reach the exit to the forest, ending up on a dirt road leading into a distance neither Ryu nor Nina have ever seen.

"This way leads to Parim.", Galen says, shielding his eyes from the sun, "It is a Forest Clan village where we'll stop for supplies. Further down the path is Windia."

He leads them along, Anna walking alongside Nina.

"You are from Windia, are you not?", she asks.

Nina nods, shrugging.

"My...family lives in a town on the other side of the woods.", she says, "I'm not sure, really."

"But what about your parents?"

"They...I don't know. It's...hard to understand, really. I'm just confused about things, right now."

"I understand. Perhaps we'll settle those questions when we reach Windia."

Anna nods, walking back up to her husband. Ryu walks over, opening his mouth to ask a question...when they hear the familiar rumbling of riding horses.

Ryu and Nina grip each others hands as Galen groans, walking at point as the seven horsemen ride towards them, dismounting and standing

before them.

"Out of the way.", Galen growls.

"_Give us the boy and you shall not die, peasant._" the lead soldiers, eyes glowing blood red, growls.

Galen sighs, folding his arms.

"No."

The soldier swings his sword with blinding speed...

And hits dirt, Galen blurring and appearing by his side.

The soldier swings again...and Galen catches the sword, his eyes beginning to crackle.

"I will warn you this once," he growls, his voice becoming deeper and scratchier, "One person here has seen my true form and lived. She is behind me. You are in front of me. If you value your lives, be somewhere else."

With a flick of his wrist, he shatters the sword, stepping back. The soldiers don't move, drawing their weapons...and Galen smiles.

He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes, stretching out his arms. He opens his eyes...and now his eyes are glowing deep blue.

"So be it.", he says in a low, rumbling voice.

His fingers extend into claws, his third and forth fingers fusing.
His muscles expand, his skin becoming rocky and hard.

Massive wings appear out of thin air, folding out of his shoulders as his body begins to grow.

Energy crackles in his eyes, his toes becoming three large talons, his legs snapping out like a bird's.

His body covers itself in amber-brown skin, replacing all his clothing but his tunic, his hair burrowing back into his head and replaced by two massive, red horns...and his face becomes a defined, noble snout, completing his transformation.

Into a nine foot tall, amber skinned gargoyle, clad in a blood-red tunic.

"Enough.", he growls, in a rumbling, low voice, "I am Garr. Guardian in service to the Goddess Myria. I will give you this one chance to run."

[illegible]

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Chapter 4:

Transformations

Jansen Maroen splashes the water on his face, kneeling at the brook as his horse drinks.

He's heading towards the fort construction sight, alone and without his troops. He has a mystery to solve and questions to answer.

Because when he took out his sword today, there was blood on it.

Even though he cleaned it two days ago and hasn't drawn it since.

He shakes his head, climbing back into the saddle, and urges his horse on as his ride trots down the dirt road.
>

The spear blurrs as Garr swings it, each of the soldiers groaning as they fall to the ground.

"Be thankful I used the blunt end," the massive gargoyle states, "Or else you'd be tripping over your heads. This is your final warning. Move or be moved."

Ryu sidesteps behind Garr as Anna walks to the guardian's side, eyeing the soldiers neutrally. And the red disappears from the soldiers eyes, the seven climbing onto their horses and quickly riding away.

"That was odd.", Anna says, "They were not themselves."

With a glowing, blue light, Garr is Galen again, his spear disappearing in a plume of smoke.

"Agreed.", he says, "Glowing red eyes are not a clan trait I know of. Except maybe the Green...but they are never hostile."

He turns...and sees that Ryu was standing right behind him. He furrows his brow, turning to his wife. They nod, together, coming to the same conclusion.

"I suggest we hurry to Parim.", Galen says, "And how far is she from there?"

Anna turns to him, eyes snapping wide open.

"No!", she snaps, her normally gentle demeanor broken, "We are not involving her!"

"Anna, she is always involved. I wish to know how and what this pertains to."

"That...she always makes things far more difficult, Galen. I'd rather we not bring this to her attention."

"Anna..."

"Galen..."

Ryu clears his throat, Nina looking on with a bemused expression.

"Um..._who's_ attention?", he asks.

Galen and Anna look to each other, then back to the two.

"A relative.", Galen says, "Come. We'll settle this in Parim."

And they continue on down the road.
>

"Prince Joshua! What news?"

The dark-brown haired noble levels a gaze at the taller, armored man, the guard quickly cringing and stepping back.

"Good.", Joshua says, "Tell His Majesty that I will meet with him upon my arrival to the throneroom. And be quick about it. It would be unpleasant if I arrived before you."

The soldier runs past Joshua, running up the stairs to the double doors of the throneroom as the prince walks down the royal-purple carpetted floor, stopping at the stairs as he hears the soldier announce Joshua's coming.

It has all but been set in stone, of course. Everything about Joshua's life.

He is the true Prince. He is heir to a clan that stands above all others.

Only Kayla resists, of course. He likes that about her. He saw the graceful, beautiful woman as a princess three years ago at a meeting of the Clans...and he simply told father he wanted that windian woman as his.

All the more tempting now that she's the Queen. Taming a princess to one's whims, well, any scoundrel or noble could do. Taming the _Queen..._well, that is a job only for him.

And Joshua smiles, walking up the stairs, grandly pushing open the double, oak doors, gripping the gold and ruby embedded handles as he smiles, pushing out his chest as the purple robed man in the grand, dragon-shaped throne looks upon him with an air of displeasure, various nobles stepping out of his way.

"Prince Joshua," the Emperor states, "You interrupt Our business."

"My marriage to Queen Kayla is all but set in stone.", Joshua grandly announces, "I give her two weeks. If she does not accept my generous offer, Windia dies. Is that acceptable, Father?"

"Joshua..."

"Ah...of course. Is that acceptable, _Emperor Koblias?_"

"Hn...it is acceptable. We have the forces to spare to burn a city."

"Not a city, Your Highness. If she does not accept, we wipe out all life on that immediate area of the continent. And I want her here to watch."

"That is unreasonable-"

"That _is_ my wish. Unreasonable, perhaps, but you said you would do anything to see me married off. I wish not for one of the gold-diggers or harlots that fawn over your presence, Your Majesty. I wish for the Queen of Windia, as is my birthright."

Koblias folds his hands in front of his face, the nobles looking uneasily between the father and son.

"Acceptable, Prince Joshua. Your request is granted. Now clean up for supper, we will be having guests."

"As you say, Father.", Joshua says.

He bows, smiling with gleaming white teeth, and walks out.
>

The fire crackles as the four hold the shish-ka-bobs over the flames, Ryu, Nina, Galen and Anna sitting as the sun begins to set in the west.

"What I find disturbing," Galen says, "Is that the soldiers went out of the trance so easily. Ryu, did the soldiers seem familiar?"

"Their behavior did.", Nina quickly responds, "Did you ever see anything like that?"

Galen nods, sighing.

"Unfortunately, yes.", he responds, "A long, long time ago. However, _that_ entity was also destroyed a long, long time ago."

"Still, it is a matter for another day," Anna responds, smiling, "Ryu, Nina. How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Ryu responds, "A bit confused, but fine. Why?"

"Just curious. How long have you known each other?"

"Nine years.", Nina responds, smiling slightly, "We were raised together."

"I was left at her parent's doorstep when I was ten.", Ryu continues, "They say I hit my head."

"Amnesia?"

"Yeah. I can't remember anything before that."

Galen nods, silently. He purses his lips, sighing as he presses his index fingers to them.

"Ryu...why are you and Nina doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Looking for the soldiers. If I am correct, you displayed power and drove the soldiers away."

Both of them look at Galen with wide eyes, Ryu's mouth slacking open.

"How...how did you-"

"They would not come back. Then...why?"

Ryu slowly looks to Nina, shaking his head as he turns to the fire.

"They killed my father.", Nina finally says, "My adopted father."

Ryu snaps his head to Nina, mouthing a question.

"So you are both adopted.", Galen states, "This shows promise. We may find the truth indeed in Windia. Ryu, I will explain this to you: The man who killed your father is not to be blamed for his actions."

"Not..."

"He was possessed. His actions were not his own, and your father was simply the closest target. This is a mystery we are to get to the bottom of, beginning with who is pursuing you...and why."

Galen rises, his voice lowering and rumbling.

"Down this road, one mile," he says, his eyes beginning to glow faintly, "There is a village hidden in the woods. There we will find someone who can aid us."

"Galen!"

Galen turns to his wife, narrowing his eyes.

"As much as I don't like her myself, things are proceeding as they always do. We must involve her now."

"I...don't like this."

"Neither do I."

With a flash of light, he becomes Garr, folding his arms.

"The forest is dangerous. I will take lead.", he says, eyes crackling with blue energy, "Come. It is nearly nightfall. It is time to begin this quest."

He walks off, folding his wings about him like a cloak, Anna shaking her head as she sits on the log.

"He can be overzealous," she says, sighing, "But his heart always means well."

"Oh...he sounds like he's gone through this before."

"Many times, actually. I should explain later."

Anna climbs to her feet, folding her arms.

"But first we have to meet someone I truly hate seeing."

She walks off after Garr, Ryu and Nina quickly following.

>

He has it all planned out.

Nail his shoulder to pin him. Knock his sword away. Pin his neck to the ground and aim the crossbow at his stomach.

And before he fires, get an answer on _why_ Jacobi died.

That's Erik's plan. Find him, get the answers, kill him.

Jacobi would hate it, but the Grass Runners do this sort of thing.

You don't kill a Grass Runner's friend and survive three days. It's just not right.

Makes the clan look bad.

Erik smiles, slightly, to himself at the irony. He already does make the clan look bad, in many ways.

Bad history, bad outlook on life during the early years. Maybe this time he's spent as a healer and a friend is just his way of getting into the Yggdrasil when he dies.

Maybe not, but, still. Jacobi was his friend. Jansen wasn't. Never knew him.

No hesitation when he guts him, then.

And with that, he disappears once more into the foliage, tracking the sounds of hoofbeats.

>

The site is just three miles after this forest. Hopefully, they can tell him why he never arrived in Kaghtin, because he sure as Hell doesn't have a clue.

Jansen Maroen pulls off his helmet, putting it in one of the saddlebags as he wipes the sweat from his brow, rolling his head back as he hears audible cracks from his neck, groaning at the released tension.

And yelling as a black crossbow bolt cracks his shoulder armor, pushing him off his horse and onto the ground.

He rolls, a bolt missing the weakened plate as he draws his sword, standing...and sees a Grass Runner, a dogman, jumping down from a tree.

An old one. And experienced one.

And one that's looking at him like a dead man.

"Are you insane?!", Jansen demands, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"My name is Erik," the Grass Runner responds, "I'm the last person you're going to talk to."

He cocks the crossbow, a bolt firing out, whizzing past Jansen's ear and hitting a tree, the horse running away.

"I'm a Commander in the Council's forces, Grass Runner," Jansen says, the two circling each other, "I've done nothing to you, so just leave and I'll say nothing of this."

The Grass Runner grins, cocking an eyebrow.

"You're a cocky one," he says, "And you're also a bit forgetful."

"Of what?"

"Let me remind you."

And with that, Erik blurrs, fading in with the forest and appearing behind Jansen, slamming the butt of his crossbow into Jansen's head, sending him forward and onto his knees.

"Now, let's get to our lesson," Erik says, kicking him in the kidneys, "And today, Doctor Erik will teach you why you don't murder the friends of my clan."
>

The forest is, to put it lightly, forboding as Hell.

A black shroud covers it, even the starlight not penetrating as they enter...and soon find themselves surrounded by light.

Torchlight.

Torchlight held my many, scale-covered nubile men, dressed in loin cloths and facepaint, nothing else.

"I...think we're in trouble.", Ryu says.

Galen turns to Anna, and nods. Anna walks from the group, the men turning their expressionless eyes to her as she clasps her hands, closing her eyes.

The air turns still. The wind stops, the flames not swaying in the slightest as a faint white light begins to emanate from the woman.

And a pair of blue, gossamer wings burst from her shoulders, not tearing her clothes, Ryu and Nina stepping back as swirls of energy come from the ground around her.

"Stand back.", she says.

And the men, as one, step back, opening a path to her as she waves her hands, a sphere of light surrounding herself and her companions.

Within seconds, they are at the center of a primitive village, surrounded by huts, more of the nubile scaled people walking around, circling the sphere as it dissipates.

"I am here!", she announces, "We're here to talk to you! Now come on out, you stuck up bitch, and face me!"

A faint laugh is heard as the tribesmen come to attention, several gathering at the center hut and going to one knee.

"_Well...well well weeeeeell._", an exotic, seductive female voice says, whispering all around them, "_I hardly expected you to be here so soon. Did your husband convince you otherwise? Your sway on your lovetoy must not be as strong as I thought._"

"Damn you, sister, stop toying and come out!"

"_Not until you admit it._"

Garr groans, holding his snout and shaking his head.

"Come out!", Anna snaps, "Now!"

"_Make me._"

With a yell, Anna points her hand at the center hut, a burst of gold-white light lancing out and shattering the house, the tribesmen yelling in an undecipherable language, running about.

And standing where the hut was is a woman in a sectioned black and purple dress going down to her ankles, a generous amount of cleavage showing on her unmarred skin, despite being at ground zero of the blast.

"Ah, Myria.", she says, sweeping back her indigo-blue hair, letting it fall to her waist, "How the times do change us."

"Shut up, Deis.", Anna growls, "We have Destined Children to attend to."

>

3. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator">

Chapter 5:

Players Cast Together

It takes him 3.5 seconds to call up the memory of the portal appearing right under his feet.

2.1 seconds to realize the portal was a spacial wormhole activated by a power fluctuation in his flight belt.

1.8 seconds to realize he's on another world.

And 7.2 seconds for him to start laughing with joy.

I'm gone! I'm finally off that stagnant little snooze-trap! I'm free! I'm free! I'm...lost.

Well, shouldn't be a problem. After all, he's Jack Cole. Adventurer(at least potentially) and member of the a race that, for all intents and purposes, stands above all others on the evolutionary ladder. Otherwise, they're a boring bunch of sops to the degree that Jack's tried to run away many times before.

"Well, might as well get my bearings," he muses, climbing to his feet and dusting off his jacket.

A quick use of his mind powers pinpoints a town about a mile from here. And so Jack begins his walk towards a new life.

Myria...?

--

Somehow, Ryu recognizes the name. The Goddess Myria, the Great Enemy, the Brood-Killer.

He felt apprehension when he realized Galen was a Guardian. A servant to the Goddess and slayer of dragons...wait, how did he know Guardians were dragon-slayers? That's ancient history...

And he's not sure who to side with, seeing the two women...sister deities, to be exact...glaring at each other, the snake-people standing a good, far distance away.

"I made it clear to you and your stone-cast marital aid never to come here, _sister,_" Deis growls, eyes glowing dark violet, "It's over between us."

"There are more important things than our petty differences, Deis."

"You imprisoned me for _five hundred years!_ That wasn't easy to get over!", Deis snaps, and waves a warning figure, "And don't think that

I didn't try."

"If you two would kindly stop arguing," Garr states, "I think we have more pressing issues."

Deis turns to him, then back to Anna.

"Alright," she says rolling her eyes, "Let me guess, Ryu and Nina, right?"

Garr nods.

"Well, they're older this time. We get on a late start? He's usually only fifteen by the time he comes around to me."

"They were away from the main civilizations until they were nineteen, Deis," Anna explains, walking over to Deis's side, whispering, "Civilization came to them."

"Hm...mother or father?"

"Father."

"Hm...both?"

"They were raised together."

"Odd. Usually they don't meet for a while."

"They found him at ten years."

"Ah..."

Deis nods, walking over to the couple.

"Ryu, Nina," she says, "I am Deis, the most powerful sorceress in the world...and someone you two are going to become quite familiar with."

A swing of the metal-toed boot stuns Erik, giving Jansen the moment he needs to roll away, his vision swimming as he draws his sword.

"A...alright," he croaks, "Why...the Hell...are you after me?"

"Playing dumb doesn't suit you," Erik growls, aiming his crossbow at Maroen's chest, "Now, you want to die standing, or lying down? Because if you want the first option, I suggest you attack now. I'm out of practice and my trigger finger's feeling itchy."

Jansen snarls, swinging his sword back...and promptly collapses to the ground, stabbing the sword into his side as he falls.

Erik walks over, nudging him with his foot. Nothing.

He's unconscious.

"Ladon damn it," he mutters, "I can't kill an unconscious man..."

He groans, picking up the fallen commander, hefting him over his shoulder as he walks to the forest exit.

"...you see, there's always some sort of problem in the world," Deis says, her four 'guests' sitting with her around a low-legged table, on their knees and sitting on cushions inside a large hutt, "Power corrupts. It's the absolute truth. When a clan gains power, it also gains self-importance, and that results in them being really, really pissy about things. And that's where your problem comes from."

"Is that who attacked us?", Ryu asks, "Those people were from another clan?"

"Yep. Also a manipulative one, to.", Deis responds, "From what I've been told, they've been manipulating the Yggdrasil. That sounds bad."

"Yggdrasil?", Nina asks, "It's real?"

"More than real. The Yggdrasil is the sentient embodiment of all plant-life on the planet," Deis responds, "And, considering we have some plant-life in our bodies, it can control us, to. And if something can control even an aspect of ol'Yggy, that spells trouble with a capital C."

Galen nods, sighing.

"Another Cycle. Wonderful. Deis, do you know anything about who the enemy is?"

"It's another Empire. Not exactly nice guys, but their leader has a shred of hope. He's no Zog, but I'm betting Zog's his role model. However, considering we don't have a Tyr around, this has me worried. Zog's wishes were at least going to be benevolent. He wanted peace and absolute power for his people, to make them gods and watch over Aspira. I'm guessing the present Emperor doesn't have those lofty morals."

Anna nods, folding her hands in front of her face.

"We'll need to continue to Parim," she says, "We will need allies. We need to gather the other participants of this Cycle."

"Good idea...and I can sense one participant has arrived, which you will want to seek out..."

Deis quickly dismissed the younger two, leaving her alone with Anna and Galen. Which Nina is thankful for. She could just feel the tension between the sisters. And didn't want to be there when it snapped.

So Nina simply sits, outside of one of the huts, watching the snake-men go about their work, completely ignoring her as long as she does not get in their way.

"Nina?"

She turns as she sees Ryu walking over to her, standing in front of her. She pats the ground next to her, and he sits down, Nina turning from the snake men to her friend.

"I think I owe you an explanation.", she says.

He nods, folding his hands in front of him.

"Nina, what did Mom say to you?"

"That Dad brought me home when I was just a baby," she responds, "That they decided to raise me since then."

"Just like me."

She nods, sighing, placing her hand on his.

"I don't love them any less," she says, "They raised us, didn't they?"

He nods, smiling slightly.

"Yeah. So, that's why you came along? To find out who your parents are?"

"Maybe. But mainly just to make sure you come back safe and sound."

He smiles, laughing slightly, Nina resting her head on his shoulder...

And the largest hut in the village explodes in a display of gold and indigo light.

Galen sits on the still-intact chair at the epicenter of the explosion as Anna's wings fully expand, covering a distance as wide as the former hut, Deis having changed her legs into a snake tail.

He sighs, holding his head in his hand, shaking his head as the two goddesses stare down each other.

"You _little bitch!_", Deis spats, "_I'm_ the threat? Me, the one who's been in these cycles _helping_ those people for as long as you've been the _enemy?_"

"At least I stick with my goals!", Anna/Myria snaps, her usually peaceful demeanor long gone, "I only wanted to bring peace, while you were just bored!"

"At least I kept to a side!"

"At least I didn't hold myself up with a tribe of eunichs!"

"At least I don't _sleep with my help!_"

Myria screams, lunging at Deis, taking the two down as she claws at her face, Deis converting her tail to her legs and kicking at her sister.

Galen sighs, looking skyward as the argument between his wife and sister-in-law degrades into a depowered catfight, the two rolling on the ground as slaps, gouges, kicks and bites are exchanged, both of

them screaming out curses at each other.

"Slut!"

"Bitch!"

"Primadona!"

"Jackbooted prig!"

Galen stands up, changing to Garr, summoning his spear in a burst of flame...and thrusting it down between them, seperating them and catching their hair to the ground.

"We have a job to do," he growls, "So I really..._really_ think you two should stop this."

Anna sighs, pulling her hair from the ground, standing up as her wings fold back into her shoulders.

"You're right, Galen.", she says, dusting off her dress, "At least _one_ of us has some priorities straight."

Garr nods, returning to human form as Deis rises, folding her arms.

"Good point," she says.

Anna nods, smiling, turning to walk away...

"And I still think you're desperate," Deis adds.

And Anna turns, punching Deis right across the jaw, sending the goddess reeling back...before she screams, lunging at her sister and taking her down as they continue their fight...

Ryu sighs, shrugging, placing an arm around the ashen Nina.

"We were never like that."

The next morning.

Jack rustles through his pockets, groaning as he finds them nearly empty except for a pair of gold pressed coins. Wouldn't even buy him a burger back home...

He looks around the town, a small, rural village called Parim by it's inhabitants.

Nice place. Some paved roads, but mostly soft dirt. The people are mostly wolves that walk upright but wear some clothing, usually just pants and a vest, and some humans who are indistinguishable from him.

The houses are all one or two stories, and the sparse population keeps plenty of room. Not like back home. There, overpopulation was solved by adding more and more levels. Just plain ugly.

Here, it's beautiful. Trees everywhere, even some shrines around

them. Have to look up why those're there. And, most importantly, everyone's genuinely nice to him. At least, for the most part.

He sighs, again, walking into one of the houses with a sword on a plaque above the door.

The bell rings as the door opens, a greying hard wolf-man looking up from a book and standing up behind the counter.

"Welcome, sir.", he says, "How may I be of service?"

"Uh...hi," Jack says, walking to the counter, "What's the best way I can earn money around here?"

"Animal and monster hides," the shopkeeper responds, "You bring in the hides, I give you gold in return."

"Then I guess I'll need a weapon, huh?"

"Yes."

"Great...what can I get for these?"

He lays the coins on the table, looking up as the shopkeeper disappears...and rises back up behind the counter with a longsword.

"For fifty zenny? This will do," the shopkeeper responds, "You know how to handle it?"

You kidding? I have the swashbuckler routine memorized.

--

"Sure thing," Jack says, "Animal hides, right? For clothing?"

"Yes, especially with winter in two months."

"Got it."

He picks up the sword, and walks out. Nice blade, good weight, just like the replicas.

Could use a few improvements, though...

Two hours later.

Jack walks back into town, grunting and sweating as he hauls a net behind him.

And in the net are fifty different hides, shells, horns, and bones.

The shopkeeper opens the door, looking out...and his jaw drops, his eyes going wide behind his bifocals.

"Hey, shopkeep!", Jack yells, hefting the net over his shoulder, "How much'll this get me?"

Anna's demeanor returned the moment they left the forest village,

back to her sunny, sweet personality as soon as they stepped on the road.

Galen, for one, was relieved. After breaking up the fight between Anna and Deis for the fifth time, he was started to get tired.

Ryu and Nina had fallen asleep somewhere between the second and third fight, and basically found the entire thing somewhere between humorous(Ryu) and frustrating(Nina). And the people of the village just found it to be a mess.

And so, three hours after they left the village, they find themselves at the entrance to Parim, the small little village that serves as a waypoint to Windia.

"We can look into things with the village chief. He knows us," Anna says, "If things begin to drag on, we'll stay here tonight. The innkeeper will give us a discount and Galen and I aren't strapped for zenny."

Galen looks up at the sky, spotting the sun's position.

"It is noontime," he says, "We'll find lunch and start our search. Will you two join us?"

He turns to Ryu and Nina, folding his arms.

"Um...we'll meet up," Ryu says.

Galen nods, smirking, taking a small point and tossing it to the young man.

"Meet us later, then.", he says, and he and Anna walk off.

Zenny. The monetary system, at least in this section of the world, is called Zenny. One zenny is equivalent to two-thirds a credit back home, as thirty zenny gets him a night at the inn, ten zenny gets him a good meal.

And those hides got him twenty-five hundred zenny. So he's pretty well off, and that was two hours work.

This is good.

Jack smiles to himself, walking around the town marketplace in his jacket, adjusting the dial on the inside of it to cool himself off. Jacket-mounted air conditioners. If his people can be credited for anything truly great, that would have to be it. Bloody geniuses.

He raises an eyebrow, looking around, watching as a middle-aged man and a woman talk over lunch, the man rather stern while the woman doesn't bat an eyelash.

With his parents, if Dad became stern, Mom would snap and dinner would end up being an event.

Which is probably another reason he bolted.

He sighs, looking about...and smiles, widely.

He sees a beautiful, blonde haired, winged woman in travelling clothes, talking with one of the food peddlers, shaking an empty sack in a sign that she's out of money.

Hello, Angel...

--

He walks over, reaching into his pocket, taking out a ten zenny piece as the woman gets flustered. He smiles to her, and hands the peddler the piece.

"I'll take care of that," he says, "Keep the change."

The peddler nods to him, turning back to his wares, and the woman turns to him.

"Thank you," she says, smiling.

He smiles...and all that comes out is babble as she turns and quickly walks back to a blue-haired man waiting for her.

Smooth, Jack. Let's measure your shoe size so we can see if your foot fits in your mouth.

--

He groans, shrugging.

Oh, well. Looks like she was taken. Hey, you're done here anyways. After getting that much money, looks doubtful that the shopkeep'll accept anymore skins.

--

"Where's the nearest town?", he asks the peddler, the human turning to him as he slices apart a small roast.

"Windia, half a day's walk.", he responds, "Can't miss it. Real big castle at the center of town."

The peddler grunts as the roast refuses to budge, claspings his hands together and uttering something. A beam of white intersects the meat, parting it as Jack looks on, dumbfounded.

The man turns to him, raising an eyebrow.

"What's with you? Looks like you've never seen magic before."

Magic, huh? Looks like I'm at a disadvantage...

--

"Y-yeah. Sure I have," Jack says, shrugging, "What, do I _look_ that green?"

He chuckles, walking out the town gates. And as soon as he's out of sight, his eyes flash white, and he flies towards his next destination.

Chapter 6:

Wings to Fly On

"Your behavior in the village was atrocious."

Anna nods at Galen's statement, sipping her water as the two sit at the table, under the shade of a nearby tree.

"I'm very much aware," she says, "Being around Deis does that to me."

"You two could have leveled that place...you did level that place. If it degraded past a squabble and into a battle we could have all been killed."

"I know," she responds, "But I'm not like that now, am I? Just keep me away from Deis and I'll be fine."

Galen sighs, setting his fork down on the empty plate.

"No matter what you believe, neither you nor Deis are all powerful. We will need both of you to come out of this in one piece."

"We went through the last one fine."

"Hn, I know...but I have a bad feeling about this one..."

"Krysten, buddy, give me the map."

The green haired woman shakes her head, snatching away the map before the large grey hands can reach it, blowing a tuft of hair out of her eyes. The plains-clan man next to her groans, rolling his head back.

Anyone passing by the busy market streets would notice the two.

The stunningly beautiful, conservatively dressed green-haired woman, and the plains-clan farmer, an eight foot tall armadillo, travelling with her like an indentured servant.

"I know where we're going," she responds with a hint of exasperation in her voice, "We're supposed to go to Windia, and we are in Windia!"

"Where in Windia?!", he demands, throwing out his massive, thick arms, "We're in the town, yes! A town that has a population in the six digits and we're supposed to find a certain house?!"

She stares at him, her eyes shifting from blue to yellow and back to blue.

"Look, I can translate this.", she says, "You can't. So stop criticizing me, OK?"

He looks over her shoulder, narrowing his eyes.

"What is that word?", he asks.

"Which one?"

He points to the upper left.

"Rhapala.", she says, "It's an ancient sea-clan noun meaning 'King City'. Meaning, of course, the capital city of the area, Windia."

He stands upright, walking to the city wall.

And begins slamming his head against it, over and over.

"Arbuk?", she asks, "Dearie, what's wrong?"

"Rhapala _is a city!_", he snaps.

She folds the map, raising an eyebrow.

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes! _Yes!!_", he yells, "It's a city _four days walk_ from here that's a _seaport, like on the map!!!_"

She bites her lip, sighing.

"Oh, well. Even I make mistakes."

She shrugs.

"We'll get a room and start our way there tomorrow."

She grabs his hand, pulling him along, nearly pulling him off his feet as she brings him to the thick of the marketplace.

Galen and Ryu walk out from the town, Anna talking with Nina in the Parim marketplace as the Guardian leads the young man away.

"Ryu, there is something that concerns me," Galen says, "What do you know of your past?"

"Other than Nina's parents taking me in, nothing.", Ryu responds, shrugging, "Why?"

"Do you know how to use a weapon?"

"Um...just a fishing rod."

"A broadsword? A rapier? A longsword?"

"Can't say, no."

Galen nods, walking over to a nearby tree and snapping off a long branch.

He walks over, tossing it to Ryu.

"We'll see."

He runs at Ryu, changing into Garr, summing his spear and bringing it

down on Ryu's head.

Ryu blocks with the branch, sidestepping, spinning and swinging the branch like a sword into Garr's spearshaft.

Garr brings the butt of the spear up, Ryu jumping off, hopping off the spearblade and thrusting the branch forward...and locking it on Garr's spear handle.

The two freeze, Garr's eyes dimly glowing, Ryu's eyes wide-open with shock.

"Now," Garr says, "How did you do that?"

"I...instinct?"

"Instinct does not have us do advanced combat techniques," Garr responds, his spear disappearing in a plume of smoke, "There is much mystery to you, Ryu. I say that we find the answers to these questions."

He reverts to Galen, taking the branch from Ryu's hands and tossing it away.

"That's enough for today," he says, "We'll spend the night in Parim. I think we should take time to think about this."

Ryu nods, and follows Galen back to the town.

Now this is more like it.

--

Jack already has an appreciation for Windia.

Throbbing masses of people going about their business, a diversity of different species of people walking around.

Chaos. Pure, utter, chaos. But a benign chaos, a chaos that promotes growth.

This is the sort of thing he's been looking for. Paved stones under his feet, beautiful blue skies above his head, houses built like a fantasy novel, out of wood and stone and tile and windmills as far as the eye can see.

And a massive, white-stoned castle overlooking it all.

"Perfect," he says, walking to a produce stand, "Just perfect..."

"I'm glad you enjoy our town."

He looks to his right...and smiles.

The speaker is yet another beautiful woman, wings coming from her shoulders like the woman in Parim. Although, considering the majority of people he's seen so far have similar wings, this should be no shock.

But something about the woman seems to draw him in. The eyes. Blue-green eyes, twinkling ever so slightly as he stares.

"Yeah," he responds, "It's a nice place."

"I rarely hear compliments about the city from visitors," she says, smiling, "Usually people complain about the noise, about the crowds, even about the smallest things such as a crack in a worn paving stone."

"People take what they have for granted," he says with a grin, "I just treat everything like a new experience."

He extends his hand, smiling.

"My name's Jack. Jack Cole," he says.

She takes his hand, blushing deeply as he raises her hand to his lips.

"It was a pleasure, Jack.", she says, "I should be going."

She takes her hand back, smiling as she walks back to five armored winged men, who escort her down the street and to the castle.

Jack smiles, turning back to the produce stand...and cocks his head, seeing the seller stone-faced and still. He stares at the man for a few minutes, inspecting the plum-like gold fruit in the stand, picking up three and placing them on the counter.

No response. As much as he hates the culture he came from, Jack still knows stealing is not a good idea.

"Something wrong?", he asks, snapping his fingers in front of the man's eyes.

The man jumps, his wings ruffling.

"Do you know who that was?", the merchant demands.

"Nope. Shame, to. Never got a name."

"That was Queen Kayla!", the merchant responds, "Oh, dear..."

"What's the biggie?"

"She is all but-"

Jack snaps his head up as he hears a scream, bolting off to the direction of the castle.

"...engaged."

Kayla pulls at her collar involuntarily, her body suddenly hot, her wings ruffling not on her own will.

He kissed her hand. No warning, no prompting. The man probably didn't even know who she was and he still kissed her hand.

How...romantic.

She smiles to herself.

Romance is the last thing she ever expected. Her suitor never relied on that, only relying on threats to herself and her people. Her position never mandated it. It was completely, absolutely unexpected.

And by the name not, completely, absolutely delightful...

"Your Majesty?"

She turns to the lead guard, smiling faintly.

"Yes, Gerich?"

"There are people at the gate."

She stops in her tracks, the other guards stopping with her, the elder soldier taking lead.

At the gate to the castle are four men, each in grey-and-black armor, wide, long swords at their sides.

"Agniyan soldiers," Gerich mutters, walking forward, "This is the property of Her Majesty. State your business."

One of them nods, pulling off his helmet, revealing a head of thick red hair.

"I come with a message from His Majesty Joshua," he says, Kayla's heart jumping at the name, "His Majesty demands the Queen comes with us."

"Unacceptable," Gerich responds, "She has been given two weeks!"

"His Majesty wishes to see her."

The soldier draws his sword, the other foreign soldiers chuckling.

Kayla shakes her head, clenching her eyes shut. She dares not think was sick mind-game Joshua has planned for her tonight.

"Now, stand aside, old soldier," the agniyan says, "No need for bloodshed."

Gerich reaches for his sword's hilt...

But the foreigner is faster, crossing the distance in an eyeblink and plunging his sword through Gerich's chest.

The man smiles, pulling the sword out, letting the elder windian fall at Kayla's feet.

And Kayla screams.

Her guards reach for their swords, finding them blown away by simple force spells from the agniyans as the leader raises his sword to Kayla's chin.

"Now, Your Majesty," he says, "Care to see anyone else die today, or shall we go?"

He grins, darkly, eyes flashing bright green...

And his sword compresses on itself, the blade folding back until it's a wound piece of metal on the hilt.

He gives off a surprised yelp as his armor comes to life, the joints fusing, the metal becoming skintight and immobile, the crotch becoming particularly tight and making him yelp.

Until his armor becoming nothing more than a metal casing, keeping him in place like an iron statue.

"That's no way to treat a lady."

Kayla gives off a relieved breath as Jack Cole walks by her, walking over to the agniyan soldier as the red-haired man struggles to even turn his head on the airtight collar.

Jack pushes on the armor, the agniyan screaming as he tips over, falling on his side with a thud, the windian soldiers trying to keep back a satisfied chuckle.

"Your boys need to be taught some manners, sweet-cheeks.", Jack says, turning to the surprised foreigners, "Here."

He extends his hand, the air rippling as a sphere of psychokinetic force forms, growing to nearly a good foot in diameter.

"Catch."

He tosses it at them, the agniyans watching in wonder...and the sphere detonates, a wave of force tossing them about.

"I can still do a few more," Jack says as the soldiers struggle to their feet, "My reserves run real deep. Now get the ladies man and get out, before we see just how deep your armor goes when I crunch it into a ball and shove it down your throats."

One of them chants something, the four disappearing in a burst of yellow.

"Why didn't they do that in the first place?", Jack asks.

"I...I've been taught certain magic shields. They've been with me since birth."

She goes down to her knees, cradling Gerich's head, the elder groaning as his armor becomes slick with blood.

"Oh Ladon, Gerich...", she whispers, tears forming in her eyes, "Get a healer."

One of the guards nods, running to the castle as Jack kneels down

next to her.

"Let me," he says, placing his hand on Gerich's chest.

He closes his eyes to hide the white glow, sending tendrils of invisible energy to the wound, reknitting the blood vessels, repairing the tear in the heart. Within seconds, it's over, the damage of the wound at least sealed until a professional healer can work on it.

Jack smiles, Gerich groaning, opening his eyes.

"Your Majesty," he says, "Are--"

"They're gone, Gerich," she says, smiling shakily, looking over to Jack, "We have someone to thank for it."

She nods to the other soldiers, the three helping up Gerich and carrying him in.

She smiles, beaming, wrapping her hand around his own.

"Thank you," she says.

"It's something I was taught. I thought it would be handy."

"It was...thank you, again. You saved his life."

He nods, climbing to his feet.

"Well, I should be going, then...", he says, as she rises up.

Their eyes meet, briefly, Kayla looking down as Jack starts to turn.

"Come with me," she finally says.

"Hm?"

"Come with me," she responds, reaching out and taking his hand, "I'll not see you wandering about your way after doing something like that. I owe you my life and his."

"You...you do?", he asks with a befuddled expression, "Oh...you do. What were those people?"

"An annoyance. Bullies who enjoy their power too much," she says with a repentent sigh, "There's something different about you, isn't there?"

"Well..."

"Then you can tell me over dinner," she says, smiling, "I can repay you at least that much."

He smiles, nodding.

She turns, to drag him back in...and he pulls her back, bringing her hand up to her lips, rewarded with the same deep blush.

"It would be my pleasure, Your Majesty.", he says.

She smiles, giggling like a schoolgirl, and leads him in through the castle gates.

Far, far away.

A tomb buried deep within the earth, a place where a relic is stored.

Radria Asmidaeth walks along the marble halls, her young face heavy with burden, wrinkles edging her mouth from the long hours since she realized what is wrong.

She walks along the temple halls, through the final door to the torch-lit, altar chamber.

"Arcadies," she says.

The ancient man at the altar turns, nodding.

"You see it to, don't you?", he asks with a heavy accent.

"Yes. I do. Is it the end?"

He sighs, closing his eyes.

"No, my apprentice," he responds, "It is only the beginning."

"But you know what this means, do you not?"

"Yes indeed...I know it is him."

He turns back to the altar, clasping his hands in prayer.

"Ladon help us, they succeeded," he continues, "He is the Kaiser Dragon."

4. Chapter 7

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 7:

Chapter 7:

Hinting of the Truth

Jansen Maroen groans as he opens his eyes, feeling a faint coolness over his forehead.

"Sh. Don't move," Katalina Kirrick says, "You're bruised enough as it is."

He nods, closing his eyes at the familiar voice of his greatest friend's wife and opens his eyes as he feels the tightness over his wrists.

He looks up, seeing his hands bound by rope to the bedframe, his

ankles tied similar as he struggles. She sighs, placing her finger on his lips, Jansen wincing from the pain on his cuts and bruises.

"Where am I?", he demands, weakly, "In Ladon's name, what is this? Where is Jacobi?!"

"Six feet under," Erik says, standing in the doorway, "Where _you_ put him."

Katalina shoots him a look, caring for Jansen's wounds as the grass-runner snorts, leaning against the doorframe.

"Wâ€|what are you talking about?", Jansen demands, "Katalina, what has happened? Where is-"

"Jacobi is dead, Jansen," she responds, wearily, bags visible under her eyes, "And you killed him."

Nina opens her eyes, groaning, gripping the pillow tightly as she looks across the room to the second bed. Ryu is rolling around in his sleep, in the midst of what is obviously a bad dream.

She climbs off of the bed, adjusting the collar of her nightgown as she walks to his bed, placing her fingers on his foreheadâ€|when his hand darts out, gripping hers.

His arms quickly wrap around her, Nina yelping in surprise as he crushes her against him, pulling her down onto the bed as she finds herself immobile against him.

"Ryu?", she asks.

He quickly opens his eyes, looking down to her, his face turning bright red as he releases her. He sits up, Nina sitting up in front of him as she wraps her wings around her shoulders.

"Ninaâ€|I'm sorry," he says, "I didn't mean to-"

"You were dreaming," she says, "About what?"

"Itâ€|it's nothing important," he says, his hand on hers, "Just a nightmare. Sorry. I'm really sorry-"

She places her finger on his lips, giggling.

"No need," she says, "I was just startled, that's all."

He lies back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. She lies down next to him, tracing her gaze over his slightly glowing, exhausted face, tracing her finger over his jaw.

"Nina," he says, "What are you doing?"

"Seeing that you've been overexerting yourself," she responds, "You're exhausted, and worrying isn't helping you get any more sleep."

"I know that. I knowâ€|"

He sighs, closing his eyes.

She climbs off of the bed, sitting back on her own, watching him roll onto his side, and go back to sleep.

She sighs, shaking her head, and climbs back into her back to sleep, herself.

A nice, comfy bed, a roof over his head, a window to the world and a working bathroom. All the amenities he wants and needs.

Jack smiles to himself, taking off his jacket and placing it on the chair by the bed and night table, pulling off his boots, gravity belt, scabbard and shirt, massaging his tired shoulders as he walks to the window.

Back on the homeworld, the pollution would make for beautiful sunsets and crappy nights. You could never really see the stars. That always seemed kind of silly to him. A star-spanning, advanced civilization that could never see the stars from home.

Jack sighs, wistfully, looking up, wondering faintly which one of those gems in the sky is Yll, his home which he hates so much. He's left that all behind. It's better to scrape a living for yourself than to have everything served to you on a platter.

A knock on the door grabs his attention, Jack walking to the door and opening it and quickly grabs his shirt, pulling it on when he sees his guest is his host.

"Your Majesty," he says, "Hello."

Kayla smiles, holding closed with one hand her lace nightrobe, smiling as her wings ruffle.

"Please, just Kayla," she says, "Jack, could I talk with you?"

"Oh, sure," he says, standing aside from the doorway, "About what?"

She walks in, tightly wrapping her wings around her before walking to the stone windowsill, taking the blinds and pulling them down. She walks over to the bed, sitting on it, patting the space next to her.

With a confused expression, he sits next to her, his hands fidgeting as he debates what to do.

"Jack, it's about those men you saved me from," she says, "I need to tell you everything. You've earned that much, at least."

She places her slender hand on his, the collar of her nightrobe falling slightly open and revealing some of the lace nightgown underneath. He tries to keep from staring at her perfect cleavage, her slightly tanned, perfect skin, keeping his eyes focused on her beautiful eyes.

"The Agniyans," she says, "Are an empire up north. They are cruel, and petty bullies, all of them."

"I seeâ€|"

"Their Prince, Joshua, has been attempting to court me forâ€|years, now."

"Can't you say no?"

"He's given me an ultimatum," she responds, "Share his bed or all of Windia shares his blade."

He grimaces, nodding.

"And?"

"Iâ€|don't want to. But I won't let my people die. I cannot."

"There has to be some way to stand against him," he says, placing his hand on her arm, turning her to him, "Right?"

"His army could wipe out my entire country if he gave the order," she responds, tears running down her cheeks, "He's not the greatest power but he's a close second."

"Who _is_ the power around here?"

"The Council of Clans," she says, "The leaders of the Clans who meet and decide how treaties should be executed, prevent wars and keep the peace between the different nations. To make sure that Highfort will not attack Auria, or that Tantar will not be attacked by the Plains Clan."

Her lips trembles, as she tucks her legs underneath her, the soles of her bare feet peaking out from under her gown.

"But they wouldn't dare move against the Agniyans," she says, a hint of disgust in her voice, "No, no they wouldn't. I was practically given as a peace offering to him. As soon as I was crowned Queen they came to convince me to marry him."

Her shoulders shake, as she takes her hand back, folding them tightly on her lap.

"He is a sick, cruel man," she says, "Raised to look down at others, to lead them by fear. He gets anything he wantsâ€|even me."

She looks down, hanging her head, trying to hide her sobsâ€|

And he wraps an arm around her waist, turning her to him.

"Where I came from, we had stories like this," he says, gently sliding his finger under her chin, bringing her face up, meeting her eyes, "Where the beautiful lady would be forced into a marriage with a monster."

"Andâ€|what happened?", she asks.

"A handsome, dashing prince would come to save her from the monster."

He smiles, putting his arms around her.

"Now, I'm no Prince," he says, "But I can give it a try."

She smiles, a laugh finding its way through her sobs.

"You shouldn't," she says, "He'll cut you down in an instance."

"He can try."

She bites her lip, lying her head on his shoulder as she wraps her arms around him. Her wings wrap around them, Kayla moaning as his fingers touch her feathers.

She looks up, leaning in towards him, and brushes her lips against his. His arms become tighter around her, her fingers playing through his hair as her tongue takes in the life in his mouth.

His eyes go wide, a smile appearing on his lips as he returns the kiss, laying her down on the bed, his hands intertwining with his as they close their eyes, losing themselves in the other.

They end the kiss, their lips brushing against each other as they stare into each other's eyes for long moments.

"How improper is this?", he asks.

"Very. The Queen of Windia is only allowed to become involved with nobility."

"And?"

"I'm the Queen. I can rewrite laws."

She pulls his head down, kissing him on his lips and chin, rolling him onto his back, sitting straight up and looking down to him.

She lies down next to him, lying her head on his chest.

"Kayla—what are you doing?"

"I can't sleep. I'm terrified that I'll wake up to find him there, over me—," she whispers, "Please, just let me stay here, tonight. I just want to feel safe."

He smiles, wrapping his arms tightly around her slender frame, lying on the covers with her, and is soon lulled to sleep by the sounds of her contented cooing.

Deis awakens in the dead of night to find a shadow in her doorway.

Not one of her eunuchs, oh no. This one she's been expecting for a while. Partially afraid, partially elated, she gestures the figure forward, sitting up on her simple bed.

"Hello, there," she says, "Come over here."

The shadow moves, a long, blue-black cloak shifting about him as the visitor walks in front of her.

The visitor sits down next to her, pulling back the hood of the cloak and revealing an aged face, with long, silver blue hair.

"Our thanks for receiving us, Deis," he says, "We art in thy debt."

"Please, speak normally. I know you can."

"Yes, I can," he says, "Ryu's influence over me has had its impact. I talk like a common man on occasion. Much like he did."

"Yes. It has been a while since we have seen each other, my friend. You should not hold this over yourself. You need to let go of the guilt."

"Ryu's influence came too late, Deis," he says with a sigh, "I struck out too quickly. I should have waited."

"Yes yes, you should have."

"I slew Cray," he says, "He attack me and I ran him through, and saw him die in the Princess's arms. She was begging me to give her back her Ryu. I turned and I walked away, in shame and in indifference. I made a mistake and I have been paying for it."

"One mistake, 900 years ago. The world changes, Fou Lou. Your crime, while horrible, can be forgiven with the good you have done."

"I have ended the Empire only to see it rise under a new banner. I restored the powers of this world's Brood, but now they hold the world in their grip. The Gods are not here to protect us, and Myria cannot be involved as the mother goddess. Things are not good."

"Things change."

"From the perspective of one who has locked herself away from the world," he says, "Do you miss being involved, Lady Deis? Do you miss making a difference?"

"Sometimes. Then I remember I don't sleep for 400 years at a time," she says with a smile, "Consider settling down."

"I tried, and the woman was tortured, murdered, and her body was thrown at me as an energy weapon," he says, clenching his eyes shut, "Please, Deis, you know better."

She nods, biting her lip.

"I know, Fou Lou," she says, "I'm sorry. But you made reparations."

"You have seen?"

"I have met the new Ryu, yes. He looks much like the older one. Your attempts at rectifying the past are charming."

He nods with a heavy sigh, placing his hand on hers.

"I must be going," he says, "Matters have been called to my attention."

She nods, patting his hand. And leans over, pecking him on the cheek.

"Don't be a stranger," she says, "I will be in these parts."

He blushes, faintly, standing, and runs a hand through her hair.

And fades away without another word.

To his surprise, Jack finds Kayla still in his arms as he wakes up, the rising sun streaming through the window.

He smiles, running his fingers over her wings

And she gasps, opening her eyes, looking up at him. And she lies her head on his chest, closing her eyes.

"Good morning," he says, "Sleep well?"

She nods, moaning, rolling over and onto her back, stretching out her arms

And finds him leaning over her, leaning down and kissing her, wrapping his arms around her waist. She moans, closing her eyes, wrapping her arms around his neck.

They say nothing as they end the kiss, Kayla moving her lips down his jawline, before placing her hands on his chest and holding him arm's length.

"Not now," she says, "Thank you, though. I needed last night."

"We barely did anything, last night," he says, laying on his side next to her, "Now what? Do you call off the engagement?"

"No, I can't. I just didn't want to think about it, for a while," she responds, "I should go. If I stay away too long, my attendants become worried. I tend to be predictable."

She climbs off of the bed, fixing her nightrobe. She begins walking to the door

And an invisible tendril of energy wraps around her waist, pulling her back to the bed as she stands.

He tightly wraps his arms around her, cupping her head in his hands. She makes no protests, makes no motions to resist as he kisses her, deeply, passionately, again and again.

If the situation were different, if it were Joshua instead of this strange, odd man, she would have protested while his hands roamed over her, caressing her, ruffling her robe, stroking her wings.

She would have never responded to the taste of his tongue, to the feeling of his lips on her neck and chin. She would never have

directed his hands towards the belt of her robe, only to be met by his head shaking, saying that it's too soon.

She would never have had a lingering smile on her face as she leaves the room, sighing as she leans against the closed door, before walking back to her chambers, and her duties as Queen.

Ryu moans as he awakens, sitting up to see Nina sitting by the window of the room, looking out wistfully.

He climbs out of bed, walking over, standing next to her, looking out over the town.

"See anything in particular?", he asks.

"Nothing much," she responds with a sigh, "We should see if Galen and Anna are up. We should get going to Windia."

She turns to himâ€|

And hugs him, tightly, before walking out of the room.

He scratches his head, sighing, and turns back to the window, to see if he can spot what she found so fascinatingâ€|

End
file.